

Lectionary 15 A 2017

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

July 16, 2017

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

When you were young, did you ever hear about Johnny Appleseed? He lived as a contemporary of Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone— and all three of them were real American men whose legends have grown into mythology. The Disney studio made an animated short film about Johnny Appleseed in 1948.

Ooooooh, the Lord is good to me.

And so I thank the Lord.

For giving me the things I need

the sun and the rain and the apple seed.

The Lord is good to me.

That's a table prayer used at many church camps and scout camps. It may have been derived from the Disney cartoon.

The way I learned Johnny Appleseed was that he walked across the frontier scattering seed. Not unlike the character in our gospel reading this morning. Strolling along. Throwing seed to the left and to the right. That's the myth. The facts are that Johnny Appleseed— his real name was John Chapman— built nurseries of apple seedlings along the trails into the West (the West back then was Ohio). And he went back and forth across his nurseries once or twice a year. And it was a business enterprise to sell apple trees to homesteaders and other settlers who were moving to the frontier and building homes and farms of their own. And those apples that Johnny sold and that the farmers cultivated and harvested weren't for baking. They were for alcoholic apple cider which was a very common beverage in those times.

When Christians read this morning's parable, we typically ask ourselves what kind of ground we are. Am I good soil for God's seed to be planted? Or am I rocky soil, or thorn-infested soil? One of the hymns in our hymnal is called, "Lord, let my heart be good soil."

But the parable also invites us to think about our role in sowing. Jesus says today that the seed is a metaphor for the word of the kingdom. And his followers— then and now— were assigned to proclaim the word of the kingdom. So another one of the hymns in our hymnal is called, "We plow the fields and scatter." So the Church is an enterprise in which seed is being sown, and seed is being received. If you think of the seed as a word of encouragement, or a word of hope or guidance or wisdom or grace— if that's what we mean by "word of the kingdom"— then in some sense each of us here this morning is here to proclaim the word and to receive the word. We are

the sower which sows the seed and we are the ground where the seed is sown.

The Church that you and I are part of is in the middle of a momentous, historic shift. For over a thousand years, the Christian Church was a dominant force in western civilization. The Church *was* organized religion. It was an institution. And that period of history is coming to an end. At least in the West, at least in this country. And to some extent, as an aside, I believe that if you really want the key to understanding the United States culture and politics right now, all of that divisive and negative stuff– to understand that, you have to understand the earthquake that is affecting organized Christianity.

Last Sunday, a young couple visited our congregation. In their twenties, I'd say. And when I asked them why they chose to visit our church they told me that their own church had closed, and that they were visiting all kinds of churches to find a new church home. I'd love to hear about their journey. I wish they'd write a blog about it that I could read on the internet. What was so remarkable was that a young couple visited our church. That *never* happens. God does bring us a lot of visitors. But rarely a young married couple. And the other thing that was remarkable was why they came. They hadn't moved into the neighborhood looking for a church. They had been part of a congregation. It must have been a good one, at some point, it must have done something right because they weren't giving up on God. But their church *closed*. It *ended*. That used to not happen very often. It happens all the time.

Now that doesn't mean that Christianity isn't alive and well. Christianity is flourishing in Africa and in China. Jesus Christ is still the Son of God, the Living Word from Heaven. But it does mean that the Bible now speaks to us– to me and you– differently. The Holy Spirit speaks to us with a different voice, shows us things from a different angle than before.

For that thousand years when Christianity was dominant– when people went to church because that was what was expected, when all the leaders and pillars of society at least bowed the head and bent the knee– in that thousand years organized Christianity saw itself a garden. Today's parable, and all of the many parables about sowing and harvesting and vineyards and laborers and plucking grain and keeping sheep safe and pruning– all of these stories were read in certain ways.

I'll give you three examples of that. Pastors are trained in schools called seminaries. The original meaning of "seminary," from the 1400s, was a plant nursery. Semen means seed. A seminary was a horticultural place where seeds were nurtured into seedlings. Just like the places that Johnny Appleseed set up along the roadside into the American frontier. A seminary was originally a greenhouse, a nursery. And the church *borrowed* that language because it felt that pastors and priests were seedlings that were cultivated and prepared and then transplanted into the parish. A very orderly world. A very cultivated steadily growing world. The Church cultivated pastors– seedlings– in the seminaries and then transplanted them into the gardens of Christendom.

Example two. When the German mystical theologian Meister Eckhart was condemned as a

heretic by the medieval church the papal bull excommunicating him was entitled, “In the field of the Lord.” The Pope was the chief gardener. And he was getting rid of the weeds.

Example three. Two hundred years later. Another famous German theologian. His name was Martin Luther. Also excommunicated as a heretic by the pope. This time the papal bull read: *Arise, O Lord, for a wild boar has invaded your vineyard.*

So for a thousand years, in which the Christian Church was stable and organized and was crucial to the ordering of society, and had great status and did great deeds and built great buildings: in that thousand years, the Church saw itself as a garden, a vineyard, a place to be protected, a place to nurture, a place that would grow reliably by 5% every year. And someone like Martin Luther appeared to be a javelina— we would call him— someone attacking all of the carefully cultivated vegetation.

But now, in this new age for the Church— and it is difficult and agonizing and is taking a very high personal toll on church leaders, both laity and clergy— in this new age for the Church, Jesus speaks to us in a fresh way. And the Holy Spirit opens our ears in new ways. I am inspired— and I think you and the rest of the Church— can be inspired and uplifted by the Sower in today’s parable. He doesn’t have a garden, he doesn’t build a wall. He just keeps moving. And a lot of what he does fails. A lot of what he does FAILS. It’s a waste. Some of the seed falls on rocky ground. That’s dumb, isn’t it? Why would you waste your seed on hard ground where nothing grows? Rocky ground. But our Sower, he just keeps on throwing.

Hungry birds, swooping down, gobbling up behind you, just like Hansel and Gretel leaving bread crumbs for a trail, but the birds eat them. You’re not cultivating at this point. You’re just feeding the birds. But our Sower doesn’t mind. He just keeps on going.

Some of the seed is shallow. It’s clueless. I’ve got a whole sermon on shallow soil. I’ve got a *whole book* on shallow soil. But our Sower doesn’t mind. He just keeps on sowing.

And only every once in a while does the Sower really make a lasting difference. Something takes. Something causes a transformation. And then the payoff is big. Jesus says, 30-fold, 60-fold, a hundred-fold. But the Sower has moved on.

Jesus knew that his immediate followers were going to face a lot of failure. Rejection. Indifference. Opposition. But in this parable, the Sower doesn’t cry over spilt milk. The Sower just stays faithful to his task. Some people may think he’s crazy. Some people may think he’s wasteful. But I think this an image that should inspire us. That seed is very valuable. It is the word of the kingdom, Jesus says. But we are never, ever going to run out of seed. We don’t need to hoard.

The outcomes vary. This parable says not to worry about the outcomes. To just go on sowing that seed, that word of the kingdom. Keep on sowing. Keep on throwing. Keep on going.

*Ooooooh, the Lord is good to me.
And so I thank the Lord.
For giving me the things I need
the sun and the rain and the apple seed.
The Lord is good to me.*

Keep on sowing. Keep on throwing. Keep on going. Amen.